

Sports Fandom in Fredrick Exley's *A Fans Notes*

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ABSTRACT

People always become so fanatic about a sports, or sports team. They wear sport Jersey, buy tickets, spent a lot of time for it. Fans are always related with emotions. Be it a book, a movie, a celebrity, a character, fans are always obsessive for their hero. This fantasy leads them sometimes to depression, mental illness etc. This paper undertaken by the scholar is to analyse the fandom theory in the novel *A Fans Notes*.

KEYWORDS

Sports, football, fandom

AIM

This paper brings out the analysis of depiction of protagonist for his eccentric fandom characteristics. As the paper mainly discusses the novel *A Fans Notes*, it deals with the post modern condition of an average American, who is self absorbed, and addicted, in football and lost his life.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper analyses fandom theory in *A Fans Notes*. The paper brings an analysis of protagonist's journey to failure and mental asylum. The paper also brings forth how the character and fandom elements influence a person's life.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Even though there are several studies that have been done on *A Fan's Notes*, very less in number can be seen on the fandom theory in *A Fan's Notes*. The works like Exley's *A Fan's Notes* by Phillip Sterling, talks about the sports football. Apart from that, this paper intends to find the fandom elements in his work. No studies have so far gone in this area, except a few articles.

INTRODUCTION

The history of spectator sports dates back to the ancient Greeks where they held the Olympic Games (Miller 2006), Roman games in honour of the gods (Gardiner 2002), the Roman gladiatorial combats and various forms of wrestling in Egypt and other civilisations. However team sports of the current variety, although not as multifarious and enterprising as the contemporary world, owe its evolution to many of the combats developed in nineteenth century, from religious rituals and survival struggles of human beings. Hunting, Fishing, various forms of combat sports including boxing and wrestling, blood sports and violence towards animals in the forms of cockfight and bullfight became models for many team sports that were developed as a result of industrial revolution and the rapid process of urbanisation.

Americans, who comprised of people from different parts of Europe and from various parts of the world, are the pioneers in this respect along with England. They developed the game of basketball, a bat and a ball game named baseball and American football. Cricket and football (soccer for Americans) were team sports that evolved in England in the same century. History of team sports in America tells that the Knickerbockers, the first professional sports club was established in 1845 and the first professional baseball team Cincinnati Red Stockings (1869) was the first professional sports team.

American football and the NFL have become the greatest spectacle in the world of sports of that country. By the beginning of twentieth century itself the NFL matches became not just a major social event, but the whole nations fascination. With the emergence of television the popularity of the game skyrocketed, the game and its major heroes attained stardom and mythical proportions. Michael Oriard says that Walter Camp, the Yale coach who is known as the father of American football, wanted it to be seen as a game of discipline, obedience, pluck and tactical genius . . . a mirror of corporate America (1993). Over the decades the game has attained the dubious distinction of being brutal and extremely violent so much so that in literature and in popular imagination it has become a metaphor of war. With the rapid growth of cosmopolitan cities, among its sizeable number of affluent middle class and not-so affluent lower classes people, football became a cult sport and the major teams had mass followings and its heroes were worshipped by fanatical fans.

Sports fandom is a sociological as well as a psychological and cultural phenomenon. There is a considerable difference between a sports spectator and a sports fan. Wann, Melnick, Russel, and Pease (2001) described sport fans as individuals who are interested in and follow a sport, team, and/or athlete. Sport spectators are those individuals who actively witness a sporting event in person or through some form of media.” World over, and in the United States of America in particular, sports and games fan following, before the arrival of television in the 1950s, was inspired by radio commentaries. With the spread of television, the entire dimension of sports spectating and fan culture drastically changed. After the advent of internet and social media, sports fandom has been elevated to the status of a sub-culture to be taught in classrooms and an area for research work. Many researches conducted in the first decade of twentieth century, especially the one that was done by Pew Research Center in 2006, came out with the conclusion that half of America closely follow one or the other sport, regular sporting event, sporting teams or certain players or athletes. The same survey also proved that male sports followers double the number of female sports enthusiasts.

American literature has produced a large number of fictional narratives on sports and games. The country's preoccupation with sports and games is a legacy inherited from the phenomenon (the myth) of frontiersmanship, the movement to the Wild West, rugged individualism and the resultant individuality. Over the generations they encountered a vast continent full of raw nature which put their physical endurance to severe test. The pursuit of success catapulted by the proverbial American dream has egged individual sportsmen and teams to push themselves and their teams to the physical limits and thereby to the pinnacle of glory. This has caught the imagination of the artists, writers and filmmakers who have written scores of novels, poems and made films on American football, baseball and basketball. There are very few novels with a straightforward narrative of a match, a season of competitions, the successful career of a player or his heroic achievements. Such novels obviously do not attain any literary merit. Although the subject-player is lionised for his exploits and on-field achievements, the players confrontation with the larger society outside his play/game world is brought into focus in many narratives. Often the game or the player

is depicted in an ironic or metaphoric manner to portray the larger realities of America, viz. politics, (nuclear) war, fan culture, racial issues or the success myth.

One such American novel of the 1960s is *AFansNotes* (1968) written by Frederick Exley. The author himself is the narrator and the protagonist of *AFansNotes*. The manic-depressive author-narrator (Sterling 39) lives with, and for, one of the greatest spectacle sports in America, viz. football. He is a die-hard fan of New York Giants and one who is fanatically mad about being a fan of its quarterback, Frank Gifford. As is the practice in the most critically acclaimed sports novels, here too, the sport is not the only subject matter that pervades the novel. It acts as a referent to the life's ups and downs of its non-participant, narrator-protagonist who undertakes a relentless, but futile, pursuit of success in life and quest for fame. The subject-narrators life does revolve around the vacillating fortunes of the team and its hero and he is only able to view his life from that perspective. It was Spinrad (1981) who identified a die-hard fan as the one . . . who thinks, talks even when he is not watching a sports event. Exley, the ardent, fanatic follower of NY Giants and Gifford is one such type who represents the extremely obsessive fictional type in the socio-cultural phenomenon of fandom. The author-narrator presents a derisive narrative of instability of mind, excessive drinking and insulin shock therapy all enveloped in the quagmire of fandom.

The most striking thematic concern in the novel is a postmodern condition of the average American who is fated to live in a society driven by the quest to strike the right note in life to attain the American dream of material success. Football and Giants to which Exley gave himself up to utterly, was the feeling of being alive. (FN 8). He would drive miles to arrive at The Parrot place to watch the NY Giants match on television. The days prior to the match would be invariably spent in guzzling bottles of whisky and beer. In his own words when he has his eyes fixed on the television screen, . . . Cheering for my team. Cheering is a paltry description. The Giants were my delight, my folly, my anodyne, my intellectual stimulation. (FN 2) He is a fan who vicariously savours each moment of victory and astounding display of football acumen by Gifford and other Giants' players as his own success in life. To live vicariously through the success of his team and his player-hero Gifford and investing hugely in the emotional and psychological connect defines the essential witness-narrator of *A Fans Notes*.

Exley, the spectating protagonist, postulates that playing football and attaining success in it does not come easily as in many other jobs. In the world of football the job assigned to a player is a difficult and brutal one. In fact playing football itself is a highly demanding physical task and attaining success beyond a certain level is indeed an onerous one, which only a few can reach. The narrative thus brings to fore the success-failure and fame-notoriety antithesis through the central character. On the one side you have a few well known teams and their players, and on the other, millions of unknown fan-spectators. Exleys long saga of being an exhilarated but unknown witness-spectator or a die-hard fan has tired him out and he at one point laments about that long malaise, my life. He spent his life in many American cities Chicago, Los Angeles, Colorado Springs, Baltimore, Miami. After each passing day and year, his income came down and his days and nights spent in utter alcoholism.

The protagonist-fan attempts to compare his hero Giffords life with that of his own. They were at USC together; both had come to East almost at the same period and both desired fame. In spite of the appalling alcoholism and utter despondency, the persona of Exley is not that of a dumb, mute, unimaginative spectator-fan. His lurking, morbid fear of being labelled a mere spectator in life as in sports is one of the most telling aspects of the narrative. In pursuit of success in the life away from his passion, Exley strives to launch his writing career in New York. His stint at verbal

play (Messenger 22) results in this narrative which becomes a record of his life of fandom. In writing, unlike in sports, only posterity can decide whether the author receives accolades, awards and recognition. An instant roar from the gallery for the skills displayed or for a tactical move on the ground is not for the people who wield the pen to bring out the best of their syntactical style or imaginative flight. However, Exley wished to hear about him as a writer what another fan commented about Gifford the football hero: He is a pro. He is a pro. This would never happen.

Thus literary fame and the adulation of the crowd remain elusive for Exley. *AFansNotes* brings to the fore the presumption that sports fandom is after all a black hole. All the moments of euphoria of victory of ones team and the heroic exploits of ones hero, were good enough to be savoured in those moments only. Fandom often leads individuals to a point of isolation from others as the obsessed fan (here Exley) ends up in a mental conflict and emotional distress.

One of the chapters in a novel which invariably registers a fans obsessive following of his hero, entitled, *Straw Hat for a Madman* do not talk anything about football or fan culture. It narrates the protagonist-fan, who had submitted himself to excessive drinking, housed at 'Avalan Valley State Hospital,' a mental asylum, among the outcasts. The description of the inmates of the hospital by the author-narrator/spectator-fan draws the readers attention to how life's stark realities drive such people to utter despondency: This chapter becomes a critique of Americas monolithic success paradigm and how individuals have to conform to society's expectations of a straight individual without any aberration. As Philip Sterling says, Exley even vicariously fails to uphold in his private life . . . the everything-for-the-team, win-or-nothing ideal that football embodies, then you are not American. (40) Exleys self is vexed throughout his life as he is also seen troubled by the success his father achieved as a talented regional footballer. Exley has always been in awe of his fathers sporting prowess and the expectancy he had of his son remained completely misplaced. He is nowhere near to the ideal of an American citizen shaped by the sport of football. The player-fan/participant-spectator antithesis is sustained by the metaphor of American football. As Christian Messenger puts it . . . the consistent reference points are football and its attendant glories and heroes. (1990)

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